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## **BOOK REVIEW SYMPOSIUM**

**Limits to decolonization: Indigeneity, territory, and hydrocarbon politics in the Bolivian Chaco**

**Book by: Penelope Anthias**

**Introduction to Symposium by: Joel E. Correia**

**Reviews by: Cheryl McEwan and Joe Bryan**

**Response by: Penelope Anthias**

*Human Geography* 12(3), 2019

### **Beyond Territories of Resistance**

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I would like to thank the reviewers for their incisive and thought-provoking comments. This symposium offers a valuable opportunity to reflect on the place of my book, *Limits to Decolonization*, within a broader set of scholarly discussions – on postcolonialism, indigenous mapping, and neo-extractivism – in which my critics have played important roles. In addition to the two reviews published here (by Cheryl McEwan and Joe Bryan), I will address points raised by Tom Perreault, who participated in the recent author-meets-critics session at the AAG, and whose review appears in the Summer 2019 issue of the AAG Review of Books (Perreault 2019). I will structure my response around three core questions that are raised by the reviewers. These can be summarized briefly as: territory and decolonization, transformation and endurance, and the specter of capital.

# 1. What is the role of territory in indigenous decolonial struggles?

As Cheryl McEwan notes, repatriation of land is seen by many decolonial theorists as the root to “‘unsettling’ settler colonialism”. In her reading, *Limits to Decolonization* complicates this argument by revealing the challenges involved in the land repatriation process and the cleavages that can open up between cultural recognition and resource control. How, she asks, might such cleavages be bridged to enable progressive, decolonial politics and material distribution? Joe Bryan identifies an ambivalence that runs through *Limits to Decolonization* – what he calls a “productive dissonance” – regarding the possibilities and limits of territory as a site of decolonial struggle. On the one hand, the book insists on the radical content of the Guaraní territorial claim and privileges territory as an empirical focus. On the other hand, it is the limits of this territorial strategy – explored in the erasures of the mapping process, the racialized politics of land titling, the state’s prioritization of capitalist resource claims – that repeatedly come to the fore. I read in these comments a keen appreciation of what is at stake in the book, but also, perhaps, a frustration that it does not offer clearer answers about what a decolonial politics of territory *should* look like.

I suspect that the dissonance Bryan identifies is linked both to my positionality and to the timing of my research. The book emerged from my attempt to understand – from my own limited vantage point and based on a decade of engagement with Guaraní people of the Chaco – what is at stake in decolonization. For many Guaraní people, territory is central to this project. Territory here is understood as the locus of a collective struggle for freedom, a site for nurturing and

defending other kinds of relations following a century of racialized dispossession. Yet, my research also sought to answer questions expressed by my Guaraní interlocutors about why their territorial claim had produced such ambivalent results; to give voice to the disillusionment felt by many indigenous people in the Bolivian lowlands two decades after the creation of Native Community Lands and one decade after the election of an indigenous president. Here, it is significant that my research took place in the aftermath of the ‘territorial turn’, unlike much of the literature on indigenous counter-mapping. It also coincided with the expectations, then the disappointments, of Bolivia’s ‘process of change’. In many ways, this has been a time of frustrated hopes for indigenous peoples of the Bolivian Chaco.

In some ways my research anticipated this. My decision to focus on an indigenous territorial claim that overlies Bolivia’s biggest gas field was informed by my skepticism about multicultural forms of recognition – as well as about the promise of state-led decolonization via extractivism. By interrogating the *limits* faced by indigenous territorial claims, I hoped to understand something about the contours of the colonial present. In writing the book, I have sought to make visible the conditions of coloniality and capitalism that constrain indigenous struggles for territory, but without losing sight of the decolonial content of such claims.

Of course, it could be argued that a “politics of recognition” will never produce decolonial outcomes (Coulthard 2014).<sup>1</sup> Certainly, other scholars have gone further than me in suggesting what decolonization *beyond* recognition politics might look like (Ibid; Simpson 2015). My book’s focus on territorial recognition reflects a paradox at the heart of indigenous politics in the

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<sup>1</sup> See Fraser 2018 for an alternative viewpoint.

Bolivian lowlands: claims to territory directed at the state remain a central axis of indigenous struggle even as the ambivalent outcomes of such claims are starkly evident. This paradox continues under the Movement Towards Socialism (MAS) government, where Indigenous Originary Peasant Territories (the new term for indigenous territories under the 2009 Constitution) are now encountering many of the same obstacles as Native Community Lands. At stake here is a stubborn persistence of the politics of recognition in the face of its recurring limits.

How should we respond to this? While I agree with McEwan that *Limits to Decolonization* complicates the question of land repatriation, it should not be read as an argument for abandoning territory as a site of indigenous decolonial politics. For peoples like the Guaraní – who have faced a recent history of territorial dispossession and face acute problems of land access – it is difficult to imagine what a decolonial struggle *without* territory would look like. What the book does challenge is the idea that legal-cartographic recognition offers an easy solution to such claims. Of course, I am not the first to highlight the limits of mapping and land titling for indigenous peoples (Wainwright and Bryan 2009). Where this book's originality perhaps lies is in its detailed and multi-sited account of the processes through which territory becomes severed from decolonial agendas and transformed into an empty signifier of recognition. This is not reducible to a single 'modern' or 'neoliberal' logic; rather, it requires careful empirical attention to the specific contexts and variegated terrains in which territory is produced – from activist counter-mapping (Chapter 2), to state bureaucracy (Chapter 3), to everyday land politics (Chapter 4), to hydrocarbon negotiations (Chapter 5 and 6).

As Bryan observes, the book's ambivalence regarding the radical possibilities of territory reflects a second ambivalence, concerning how territory is conceptualized – as a political technology, as an outcome of struggle (in a Lefebvrian sense), or as a site of radical ontological difference. At different moments, each of these conceptualizations comes to the fore. This refusal to fix territory as a concept may be unsatisfying to some readers. Yet, it also, I hope, conveys something about how territory acts as a site of equivocation (Viveiros de Castro 2004) between decolonial projects and the logics of the state, capital, and multiculturalism. While the territory's legal-cartographic production is located firmly within the terrain of recognition politics (where it is permeated and challenged by broader processes of territorialization), Guaraní claims to territory emanate from somewhere else – from a historical memory, ways of being, and conceptions of living well that are not legible to the state.

McEwan's commentary suggests that this Other locus of enunciation could have been more strongly articulated in the book. While the ethnographic sections do offer glimpses of a Guaraní life-world built around norms of reciprocity and more-than-human relations, readers will not go away from this book with a deep understanding of Guaraní epistemology (arakua) and ways of being (ñande reko). The question is: should they have done? I am not sure. Those working in the field of political ontology have demonstrated the political stakes of making visible indigenous ontologies and their radical challenge to Western humanism. However, this was not my project. I also remain skeptical that rendering indigenous ontologies legible to a Western audience will contribute towards the thriving of indigenous life-worlds – or that non-indigenous scholars are best positioned to narrate such worlds. In doing so, we risk not only “speaking for the subaltern” (Spivak 1988), but also obscuring our own locations within the resource assemblages that

threaten indigenous futures. That is, I worry that indigenous ontologies, if treated uncritically, could become a new liberal horizon (Povinelli 2018) that detracts attention from the violence of the colonial present. It is to this colonial present that *Limits to Decolonization* turns its attention.

## 2. What endures in the wake of properitization and extractivism?

A second question posed by the reviewers is the extent to which indigenous understandings of land and territory have been fundamentally and permanently transformed by engagement with state land titling and hydrocarbon development. The book points to aspects of transformation and endurance, which play out in contradictory ways across different scales of Guaraní life. At the level of indigenous organizational politics, it is perhaps the transformations that stand out, from leaders' entanglement with the bureaucratic procedures of land titling to their reimagining of the Native Community Land claim as a site for capturing and distributing hydrocarbon rents. In contrast, in rural communities, the fabric of everyday life continues to be governed by relations of reciprocity and resource sharing, by the seasonal rhythms of fishing, sowing, migration and wage labor.

This distinction requires qualification. As Chapter 6 argues, the Guaraní leadership's vision of gas-funded territorial autonomy was partly an effort to recapture the political content of territory, which was central to earlier processes of indigenous organizing but had been evacuated from the state land titling process. Despite the growing distance between Guaraní organizational politics and community life, leaders are also members of rural communities and express concerns about the lasting consequences of hydrocarbon development for Guaraní ways of being and relations

with land. Meanwhile, even in the most remote communities, everyday life is not immune from the effects of propertization and extractivism. Chapter 4 documents how the fragmentary effects of land titling have exacerbated processes of territorial enclosure, threatening an established moral economy of resource sharing. This is not just a result of propertization, however, but reflects broader social-ecological changes – from climate change to the distribution of barbed wire through gas-funded state cash transfer programs. In this context, the question is perhaps less whether Guaraní understandings of land have been fundamentally altered by propertization (I would argue they have not), than how Guaraní communities will adapt to a broader set of socio-ecological transformations in the Chaco.

As the reviewers note, a central aspect of this question relates to the long-term political and ecological effects of extractivism. Chapter 6 charts the articulation of a new vision of gas-funded territorial autonomy among the territory's leadership following a financial agreement with Repsol, and its challenge by a rival leadership that promised to incorporate the territory in state forms of gas rents distribution. As Perreault (2019: 165) notes, “understandings of territory and collective belonging are framed in relation to, and according to the terms of, gas extraction” – something I explore through the concept of hydrocarbon citizenship. As all three reviewers observe, the lasting effects of hydrocarbon citizenship remain to be seen. This is partly because these events occurred at the end of my fieldwork. My decision to include this material was for two reasons. First, I perceived that hydrocarbon citizenship was of significance beyond Itika Guasu – something my recent research in the Chaco has borne out. And second, I realized that the Guaraní's frustrated struggle for territory, detailed in the preceding chapters of the book, was key to understanding these dynamics. Here my argument resonates with Nancy Postero's (2007)



book, *Now We Are Citizens*, which revealed how indigenous peoples' encounters with the limits of multicultural recognition shaped demands for a new national distribution of political power and resource wealth under the MAS government.

Perhaps even more consequential in the long term will be the ecological effects of extraction in the Chaco, something *Limits to Decolonization* only touches on – in part, because my community-level ethnography was at some distance from gas wells. Independent research is urgently needed to investigate these impacts – environmental impact studies are currently funded by oil companies – and to explore how indigenous communities are making sense of and responding to them. The same is true of the effects of climate change, which periodically surface in my ethnography but which remained largely beyond the scope of the book's analysis.

Ultimately, the question of 'what endures' amidst these transformations is partly a matter of perspective. Against the yardstick of multicultural conceptions of indigeneity – in which indigenous peoples are associated with timeless cultural traditions – much may indeed be changing. However, my experiences living among the Guaraní revealed how transformation can itself be a form of endurance – from older men's memories of labor migration to Argentina, to one young woman's decision to relocate to a nearby town to cook for hydrocarbon workers in order to feed her family, to indigenous bureaucrats who are seeking direct state gas rents to rural communities struggling to cope with worsening drought conditions and declining fish supplies. Despite the book's emphasis on 'limits', I hope readers will come away with a sense of the many ways in which Guaraní people are managing to endure in the face of these challenging conditions.

### 3. Are the limits to decolonization ultimately a question of capital?

A final point raised by the reviewers relates to the persistent role of capital in shaping both the limits to decolonization and the contours of indigenous struggle in Bolivia. Bryan notes that indigenous territorial recognition represents an “essential component of extractivism”: in the very process of gaining state recognition of their land rights, indigenous peoples are forced to renounce sovereignty over the subsoil. On the other hand – or in response to this Faustian bargain – it is increasingly through negotiations over extraction that Guaraní leaders in Itika Guasu have sought to assert their territorial sovereignty. As Bryan rightly observes, this resonates with a notion that is gaining traction among indigenous rights advocates in other parts of the world: namely, that “corporations are better disposed to recognition of indigenous rights than states still compromised by structural racism.” The rise of authoritarian populism may well intensify this trend. In fact, this is not only a trend among indigenous rights advocates (see Anaya 2014), but also an effect of transnational companies’ evolving approaches to corporate social responsibility and the management of risk. As the ambiguous role of the legal advocacy NGO Equipo Nizkor in Itika Guasu demonstrates, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish where the “oil complex” (Watts 2005) ends and the NGO-activist complex begins.

While I accept Bryan’s point that this broader landscape of oil governmentality could have been more fully elaborated in the book, I do not agree that it underplays the role of capital. In my mind, *Limits to Decolonization* is precisely about the ways in which hydrocarbon capitalism both constrains and redefines indigenous decolonial struggles. However, rather than beginning from

the traditional Marxian question of how capital remakes territory and social relations, the book takes an alternative starting point: the struggle of thirty-six communities to reclaim territory after a century of racialized dispossession. In doing so, it seeks to tell a different kind of story about capital; one that reveals how the dynamics of capitalist resource frontiers are shaped by deeper (post)colonial struggles over race, property and recognition (see Perreault's review). Seen from the perspective of indigenous communities of the Chaco, natural gas extraction is just the latest in a series of historical collusions, legitimized through law, between the Bolivian state, foreign capital, and non-indigenous settlers. Understanding how capital places limits on decolonial struggles requires attention not only to the ongoing processes of primitive accumulation that sustain global capitalism (Luxemburg 1951; Coulthard 2014), but also to the situated alignments of race, property and sovereignty through which such processes unfold.

This is why the book begins with a detailed account of the origins and evolution of the Guaraní land struggle, turning to the dynamics of hydrocarbon extraction only in the final two chapters. Without this context, the significance of the 'friendship agreement' with Repsol would be difficult to grasp. It is important to state here that the book is not an endorsement of negotiations with oil companies as a route to indigenous empowerment. As Chapter 6 makes clear, the outcomes of such agreements for communities are ambivalent to say the least. What the book does shed light on is why such agreements may seem appealing to indigenous leaderships engaged in long and frustrating struggles for recognition with recalcitrant states – struggles in which capital has proved itself to be a defining influence on state power.

As Bryan and Perreault both note, the appearance of these dynamics in Bolivia challenges the apparent contrast between neoliberal, market-led governments and supposedly progressive, neo-extractivist regimes. In both cases, it is capital that ultimately appears to shape the content and outcomes of territorial struggle. A similar point is made by Maristella Svampa (2015), who writes of a pervasive “commodities consensus” in Latin America. What Svampa and others have been less willing to acknowledge are the ways in which indigenous peoples – in both neoliberal and neo-extractivist states – are becoming implicated in extractivism, in ways that go beyond ‘resistance’. Critical scholarship has been slow to confront the fact that indigenous peoples who live in extractive landscapes rarely have the power to stop extraction from happening, leaving questions of employment, environmental monitoring and benefits-sharing as the only possible issues for negotiation. In this context, more research is required to understand the ways in which extraction – through rents-sharing, CSR initiatives, labor relations, and environmental impacts – produces new dynamics of social and class differentiation within indigenous groups. In this sense, Bryan is right that there is much that *Limits to Decolonization* leaves unexplored. Nevertheless, I would contend that, compared to much recent literature on indigenous territories, capital plays quite a visible role in the book – both in territorial politics and in everyday life.

Where I do feel the book could have been more explicit is in articulating the political stakes of documenting how capital imposes limits on decolonial struggles. I have sensed in some responses a frustration that *Limits to Decolonization* does not offer a horizon of hope, a clear way out of the capitalist present. What is the point in radical scholarship if not to demonstrate that ‘another world is possible’? Since completing the book, I have gained a clearer sense of the challenge it poses to much critical Latin Americanist scholarship. Since the collapse of the

Soviet Union and the rise of neoliberalism, Latin America has been seen by many on the left as the site for political alternatives – whether in the guise of leftist governments or in the place-based struggles of indigenous peoples. While this is arguably being challenged by the rise of repressive regimes on both the left and the populist right, the search for political alternatives continues to permeate much Latin Americanist scholarship.

Writing this book has led me to question this tendency to look elsewhere – often to the most marginalized peoples – for alternatives to globalized hydrocarbon capitalism. This is not a call for individualized responsibility and ‘carbon guilt’, but rather a questioning of this propensity of Western scholars to look to indigenous peoples as the source of radical (anti-capitalist) political change while failing to acknowledge our own privileged locations within the resource assemblages we study. One effect is a tendency to focus on emblematic cases of resistance rather than routine forms of capitalist dispossession (Li 2014). In the most extreme cases, it produces a kind of strategic essentialism, in which efforts to narrate alternative worlds into being eclipse the messy realities that indigenous peoples are forced to navigate. For all the recent critical interest in “territories in resistance” (Zibechi, 2012), there are challenges to sustaining a pluriverse on a gas field. On a more personal level, witnessing the limits of possibility faced by indigenous peoples in the Chaco has pushed me towards confronting extractivism within my own society, including through participation in the Extinction Rebellion movement.

While *Limits to Decolonization* does not address these issues explicitly, it can be read as a challenge to redemptive narratives, a call to make visible (as indigenous scholars often do) the constraints of the colonial-capitalist present, and the creative ways indigenous peoples struggle

for self-determination “in the teeth of Empire” (Simpson 2014). Rather than viewing sites like the Chaco as less interesting because they appear mired in the dynamics of extractivism, I believe there is much to be learned by thinking from such places and their indigenous inhabitants about global capitalism and the ongoing challenge of decolonization.

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